

Pastoral Letter

on the Sacrament of Confirmation from Bishop Shelton J. Fabre

The baptized follow the path of Christian Initiation through the Sacrament of Confirmation, by which they receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who was sent by the Lord upon the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost. By this gift of the Holy Spirit the faithful are more perfectly conformed to Christ and are strengthened with courage to bear witness to Christ for the building up of his Body in faith and charity (Rite of Confirmation, Introduction, Nos. 1 & 2).

The Sacrament of Confirmation strengthens the baptized and obliges them more firmly to be witnesses of Christ by word and deed and to spread and defend the faith. It imprints a character, enriches by the gift of the Holy Spirit the baptized continuing on the path of Christian initiation, and binds them more perfectly to the Church (Code of Canon Law, Canon No. 879).

My dear People of God in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux:

Greetings in the Lord! One of the concerns stated to me on many different occasions since my arrival here in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux was about the diocesan policy on the process of preparation for reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation. In the above texts from the *Rite of Confirmation* and the *Code of Canon Law*, the church expresses some essential beliefs regarding the Sacrament of Confirmation. Because of the sacramental character and grace that is bestowed in this sacrament, as well as the challenge to live what the sacrament calls the recipient to undertake, candidates should prepare for and approach the Sacrament of Confirmation with reverence and joy. After much prayer, reflection and consultation, I wish to now share my own thoughts about our diocesan policy regarding preparation for reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation, and also convey some revisions to our current diocesan policy. I hope that this effort to explain our policy and these revisions to the policy which begin with the 2015–2016 year will lead to greater understanding. In addition, I pray that it will enable our Confirmation candidates, their sponsors, their parents, and the wider community of the faithful to approach and to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation with peace, reverence and joy.

A. Necessity and Location of Preparation for Sacrament – The church makes it very clear that

Bayou Catholic • Houma, LA • January 2015



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those who seek to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation are to be properly instructed and prepared to receive the sacrament (CCC Canon 890). The preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation, as with all the sacraments, most appropriately takes place in a church parish setting, and not in a Catholic school setting. I want to clearly state that I am deeply grateful for our Catholic schools. Catholic schools are great gifts to us, and they are powerful tools of evangelization and faith formation. However, our Catholic schools are not themselves church parish communities. It is clearly the role of a church parish community to prepare and initiate its members into the sacraments of the church. In the same manner that we would not refer to one of our Catholic schools a family wishing to prepare for the Sacrament of Baptism for a child, or a couple wishing to be prepared for the Sacrament of Marriage, or our candidates for First Communion, we should also not refer our candidates for the Sacrament of Confirmation to a Catholic school to be prepared for the Sacrament of Confirmation. ➡

Sacraments are most properly rooted and celebrated in a church parish community, and church parish communities properly prepare their members to receive the sacraments. It is for this reason that preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation is not provided in our Catholic high schools, and candidates must be prepared for the sacrament in their home church parish.

B. Age of Candidates for Confirmation - Within certain parameters it is the decision of the local bishop to decide the age of Confirmation in the diocese entrusted to his pastoral care. I know that there are many very valid reasons for celebrating Confirmation at an early age, and indeed there are some bishops in the United States who have made the decision to celebrate Confirmation at an early age. However, along with most bishops here in the State of Louisiana as well as others across the country, I am in agreement with our current diocesan policy that the most opportune time for reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation is as a junior in high school. I am very much aware that teenagers have much going on in their lives at this time. However, in all honesty, I think we can all agree that we are all always busy in life. The reason that I think it is more opportune to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation as a junior in high school is NOT because I want to overly burden the already full lives of our youth, but because I want to utilize the opportunity as a teachable moment. With due regard and respect for the sacramental grace that is conferred, I believe that the preparation for Confirmation that takes place amidst the busyness of the lives of our young people also practically reminds them *that they will always have to make time for God in their lives*. A full, lived relationship with God is not something that simply happens, but is something that requires an ongoing effort on our part. How wonderful it would be to believe that after Confirmation our young people will no longer have to make an effort to choose God or to create a space in their lives for worship and service to God. We are all aware that the contrary is true. We all know that in the busyness of our lives, consciously and actively creating a space and time for God is an ongoing challenge. Along with the grace of the sacrament conferred, receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation in their junior year also hopefully engenders in our young candidates an understanding, ability and respect for the fact that they will always have to actively create a space for God in their lives, and will always in an ongoing manner need to choose Jesus Christ over other enticements in life.

C. Confirmation Preparation will Remain a Two Year Program – I believe that a two year program provides another opportunity in a church parish for all of the teenage youth of a church parish to come to know one another better. In coming to know one another better over the course of this two year preparation time, I hope that parish life will be enhanced as these young people continue to advance to the level of parish lay leadership. Their knowledge of one another as members of a parish faith community will enhance parish life as they serve the Lord and the parish in ministry as adults.

D. Adjustments to the Two Year Program - While the Confirmation program will remain a two

year process, there will be some adjustments to the program:

10th Grade Program

■ In the 10th grade program, the number of ‘class’ or session hours *will be decreased from 30 hours to 20 hours*, and will remain age appropriate sessions on the Theology of the Body;

■ A 10th grade retreat of 8–10 hours will continue to be a required part of the program. At the discretion of the pastor, the retreat may be overnight or during the day.

11th Grade Program:

■ In the 11th grade program, the number of session hours will be *decreased from 30 hours to 20 hours*. A retreat of 8–10 hours will continue to be a required part of the 11th grade program. At the discretion of the pastor, the retreat may be overnight or during the day.

■ The one day Bishop’s Retreats *will no longer be a part of the 11th grade program*. However, as bishop, I nonetheless welcome the opportunity to be invited and scheduled to be a part of some parish event in the parish process of Confirmation preparation.

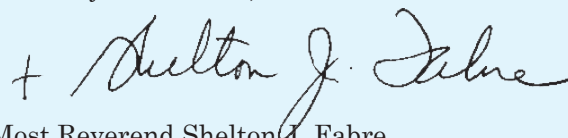
E. Request that Appropriate Accommodations Be Built into the Parish Program - I would encourage those in the parishes who will structure the parish Confirmation program according to the guidelines listed above to build into the program *appropriate accommodations*. While we certainly want to hold our youth who are in Confirmation prep accountable to the program as scheduled to manifest responsible behavior and also because they must show a willingness to accept the challenge to always create a space for God in their lives, we are all also aware that there are circumstances in life that are beyond our control. I would hope that, as necessary, efforts will be made to work with our youth to appropriately accommodate these unforeseen and unexpected occurrences in their lives.

While I know there is no perfect or universally acceptable program, I do believe that the adaptations to the program will serve to prudently address the concerns expressed to me while also respecting a good program. I hope that this explanation of the program of preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation and these adaptations will be received in an amicable way by all involved. We will continue to monitor this program, and in the future assess where we are and address any future changes if necessary.

The Sacrament of Confirmation is a grace-filled and significant moment in the faith life of our youth. After the reception of Confirmation, there are many diocesan and parish opportunities and programs for youth, as well as for adults, to enrich their faith.

With my great gratitude for your enduring faith and support, and with a promise of prayers for all of those involved in our Confirmation Programs, I remain,

Sincerely in the Lord,

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Most Reverend Shelton J. Fabre
Bishop of Houma-Thibodaux